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ABSTRACT

Questions raised by contemporary communication teachers about educational program standards and goals have foundation in the classic rhetorical controversy between Plato and the Sophists. Sophistic instruction in ancient Greece centered around techniques of oral persuasion, and the methods were attacked by Plato because they emphasized skills over truth and ethics. Plato criticized the Sophists' epistemology because their rhetoric was not based on the highest intellectual forms, mathematics and dialectics. Also, Plato claimed that the Sophists did not demonstrate a sound ethical system. Finally, Sophistic rhetoric lacked proper style. Emphases of modern communication studies into cognitive and behavioral bases for communication theories reflect the concerns of Plato. Further, as communication instruction becomes more sensitive to social, cultural, and moral values, it tends more and more to conform to Plato's ethical standards. Despite new arts and systems, the modern communications theorist is still aware of Plato's commitments to truth, aesthetics, and ethical purpose. (RN)

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the geometry of persuasion

by Robert A. Griffin

What is Plato's case against the Sophists' epistemology, ethics, and rhetoric style? An analysis of his indictment is suggestive for the improvement of current philosophical studies related to communications practice.

Current literature on communications emphasizes principles in seven different areas, ranging from public address and discussion to the dramatic arts. But what real principles are demonstrated? It seems like an act of faith to detail voice processes, sociology of communication, theatre truisms for edification, discussion techniques, dictionary studies, psycho-linguistics, and compositional style in the hope that students will be sufficiently "snowed" to believe some principle or principles actually had been presented through the methods and skills inculcated. Taking the rhetoricians at face value, anything remotely resembling a general principle of science or art is rather proclaimed than shown in the texts.

And what of goals? Here again the commonly assumed goal is persuasion, or action. Bux persuasion, or action, is the means for achieving some higher end, it is not usually thought to be a subsitute for high morality. Moreover, the padding of high pressure salesmanship into a motivated sequence method leaves many students with the impression that speech teachers believe manipulation is superior to ethical purpose.[1]

In brief, certain crucial questions must be confronted by language instructors if they hope to justify their programs in the future. What are the real principles of communication? What are standards and goals furthered by communication studies? Is there a correlation between philosophical objectives and speech instruction? Can assumed correlations be evaluated properly? Such questions are not altogether new. They are some of the most significant points in Plato's case against the Sophists. The possibility suggested here is that the controversy between Plato and the Sophists may have some educational implications for contemporary speech instruction.

Who were the Sophists? A prejudice stemming from pre-Socratic thinking to the present day easily identifies the term "Sophist" with the negative connotations of "sophistry," which refers to a smooth manipulation of words to convince the innocent that lies are true, and that the worse is the better cause. Actually, a Sophist in ancient Greece was simply a school teacher. Many of the complaints leveled against the Sophists are not greatly different from the criticisms leveled against modern teachers and modern teaching methods: the children are being entertained by literature discussions and dramatic frills instead of receiving real training in the essentials; instead of individual initiative and personal earning power, children are being taught to support progressivism and socialistic welfare-statism; patriotism is being weakened, and children are permitted to question the perennial truths of American heritage and foreign policy. The ancient complaints have a familiar ring.

The Sophist's instruction was pre-eminently education in oral persuasion. Under the guidance of the tutor, a Greek youth was to acquire a knowledge of vocabulary and syntax; he was to learn the balanced use of body and gesture; he was to acquire skill in voice variety and projection; finally, he was to weld all these talents into effective, rhetorical persuasion for use in the law courts, in group instruction of other Athenian youths, in the public assembly, or in the theatre. The student had to become knowledgeable in a number of fields.

In his doctoral dissertation recently approved and published at Goettingen, Germany, Professor George H. Wikramanayake of Ghana, Africa, has stated the problem this way: Plato argues that the Rhetors and Sophists have no knowledge of what is just. Yet in the sense of what is lawful, a speaker might very well possess a knowledge of what is just. What is the explanation?

Again, Plato criticizes the Rhetors and Sophists for not aiming at the good. But a speaker in the assembly could urge the

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adoption of a policy which he believed would be better under the circumstances. Certainly Socrates or Plato in the same situation would not have been likely to deliver lectures on ethics when the assembly was deliberating on a particular course of action to be followed or rejected. Like the Rhetors and Sophists, Plato and Socrates could only show the most probable and beneficial policy under the circumstances.[2]

Professor Wikramanayake's solution, ably supported by his research in classical languages, is that when Plato accuses the Rhetors and Sophists of speaking without knowledge, and of being indifferent to a knowledge of what is good and true, he has in mind his own knowledge of forms. Truly, if there is one characteristic which all the Sophists had in common, it is that none of them knew Plato's doctrine of Forms, and none of them seem to have been acquainted with Plato's Form of the Good.[3]

A historical condition which served to reinforce Plato's biased accounts was a conservative reaction which set in at Athens beginning with the reign of the Thirty Tyrants at the end of the Peloponnesian War. During this period most of the Sophists were put out of business, and their writings were burned. Consequently, nothing further is known about the encyclopedic instructions of Protagoras, Gorgias, Thrasymachus, and Prodicus. Yet, as Professor Broudy has shown in his history of educational methods, the Sophists laid the foundations of linguistic analysis in semantics, syntax, and pragmatics. Their work would compare quite favorably with similar projects today.[3]

Throughout his dialogues, Plato argues that mere opinion shuffling about sense-data is no cognitive basis for persuasion. Perusasion needs the discovery of truth through a knowledge of really basic, general principles. This may be called the inner critique of rhetoric; the outer critique, detailed in the *Phaedrus*, finds that haphazard, superficial oratory is a mere playing with words. Lofty rhetorical composition should be characterized by strong organization, excellence of planning, and an elevated, spiritual style gained through use of dramatic figures of speech. Such aesthetic excellence is most possible if the writer takes the time to define his terms, classify his subject, and analyze the areas to be covered in the oration.

In order that a philosophical orator of the Platonic tradition know the manner in which definitions are to be formulated, Plato elaborates a theory of cognition. To the modern temper in America this approach to the problem seems strange; but Plato did not live in the United States where philosophy and rhetoric are easily divided into two armed camps. To him there was nothing at all unusual in searching out a dialectical foundation for persuasion. In turn, there is little hope of comprehending Plato's proposals for the reform of rhetoric short of understanding his theory of cognition and the Form of the Good.[4]

As outlined in book six of *The Republic*, Plato's divided line theory separates knowledge proportionally into two unequal sections. The one, receiving the smaller area, pertains to the images and objects of the senses. The other, receiving the larger area, pertains to the forms of the intellect and of reason. By degrees of abstraction, an object of the senses moves through the intellect and receives a final form in human reason. Analogously, the areas of learning also receive a ranking. Poetry, art, and drama, which make the greatest use of imagery and illusion, receive the lowest position. Yet they are not belittled; only in the arts does human reason attain its complete fruition! An intermediary position on the line is assigned to composition and rhetoric, which make use of the intellect and the senses. The ideal sciences of mathematics and dialectic, depending on reason for their development, receive the top position. Other sciences, depending on their need for sensory evidence — e.g. physics and biology — tend to be classified with the arts. The implication of Plato's theory of cognitive forms is that rhetoric should derive her principles and definitions from the insights of mathematics and dialectics. Only in this way is rhetorical persuasion to serve the interests of knowledge and truth, the Form of the Good. All else is but comical cookery.

In addition to lacking basic principles of epistemology, the Sophists were indicted for their failure to demonstrate a sound ethic. In the case of Gorgias, Plato argues that the Sophist tends to dismiss any sense of serious moral purpose by mere dependence on antithesis and bombast. Against Lysias, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato complains that the treatment of "love" is clever, but superficial.

Again, depth and conceptual structure are lacking. In the *Republic*, Plato finds that Thrasymachus's doctrine, "might is right," is opposed to the development of good form, of character. Such a view, argues Plato, would honor survival and expediency with the title of "principle." In the *Protagoras*, as well as in the *Meno*, Plato contends that even when the greatest Sophists purport to teach moral ideals, they do not know what they are about, for the virtue of nobility is ingrained within the soul. A characterless person cannot be given a form of virtue. Protagoras's work is an optimistic waste of time. The dilemma of the Sophists, according to Plato, is that they neither care about the virtue of nobility nor have a knowledge of what they are doing. Obviously, then, the only alternative Plato has to offer for the justification of rhetorical studies is to learn first the Platonic forms of knowledge and to inquire into the geometry of the soul.

The problem for Plato seems to have been one of defining objective criteria for dialectics, the arts, and poetry. The criteria would have to be independent of shifting sense-date and the relative conditions of perception. Pursuing a model of mathematical analysis, Plato reduced problems by abstraction and formal definition to natures, classes, virtual axiom-sets, and finally rested his case for objectivity on an undefined principle of unity. But the principle of infinity was to be envisioned rather than employed. The device most characteristically used for this analysis was that of logical indentity, a concept which is evident in mathematical equalities. Justice, for example, could be assured throughout the ideal state if all the parts and effects were in a relation of identity to the whole state. The educator who trained speech teachers had a personal commitment to the axioms of virtue; consequently, he had every reason to expect that the moral effects exhibited in the conduct of his pupils would be identical with his own and with those of *The Republic*. That such a hope was at best an ideal possibility without any apodictic character for rational thinking was the greater contribution of Aristotle.

The third point in Plato's indictment of Sophist rhetoric was its actual lack of style. Vocal bombast for its own enjoyment was not good taste. Aggressive theatrical display of movement and gesture was less persuasive than farcical. Most of all, Sophist compositions had no elegant organization and arrangement. The speech of Lysias in the *Phaedrus* is intended to illustrate the defects of such compositions. "Love" is the theme, but the Sophist's declamation proclaims only the love of one human for another. The subject is not analyzed. The points seem to be jumbled. Such efforts, complained Plato, were not genuine rhetorical productions. A better way must be available.

The changes Plato suggests would affect rhetorical organization and the plan of interpretation. The organization required definition and analysis of the subject in the introduction. In this way clarity would be preserved, and the listeners could feel assured they were being directed along a well marked path. The analysis should be accompanied by explanation.

Now an artistic explanation in any Platonic discourse should cover three areas of interpretation: the literal, the moral, and the dramatically allegorical. The last type of interpretation is to be given the form of a myth. Two dialogues which make elaborate use of interpretation levels are *The Republic* and the *Phaedrus*. The cave allegory of the former is fairly well known; the discourse on love, which keynotes the latter, is less well known. According to this discourse, love has three degrees: physical attraction, love of man and learning, and love of Zeus. Analogously, compositions in the *Phaedrus* fail at the first two levels, and Socrates feels impelled to appease divine wrath by his final discourse, which must comprehend the two former levels and ascend into the realms of myth. Socrates is made to describe the ideal orator as a driver of a chariot which is being flown by the horses of reason and passion along a path toward the sun of Truth. The orator who can hold the white and black horses in a unified effort toward the ethical ideal will best accomplish his purpose. A controlled flight of the imagination demonstrates the mastery of earthly, heavenly, and solar exposition.

In *The Clouds*, (Benjamin Rogers transl.) a parody of Aristophanes on the Socratic philosophy of education, Socrates is pictured in a mood of quiet contemplation

while suspended in a basket between heaven and earth. His naive, rustic inquirer disturbs the contemplation with a banging at the house entrance. The result is a maieutic miscarriage. Certainly the Socratic-Platonic mode of thinking has had its salutary effects both for western culture and for contemporary philosophy and communications. George Boole and Gottlob Frege are some of the great Platonists of modern philosophy and systems research. Nevertheless, the point of Aristophanes is well taken. Highly elaborate, over-specialized models for communications control have a way of inviting their own cogitational miscarriages.

Modern communication studies emphasizes the need to research the behavioral and cognitive bases for sound communications theory. On this point they are in agreement with Plato.[5] The innovations of Plato are currently following the lines of psychological studies, information theory, and audience analysis with detailed research on problems of sensation, perception, attention, and conduct. Such instruction is complemented by education in the principles of problem solving, analysis, syllogistic reasoning, and statistics. Once again, the development of statistical research into such areas as phonetics, oral interpretation, and audience analysis has permitted a greater precision in the treatment of behavioral principles in communication. *The Truth* as any ultimate settlement of opinion has by no means been achieved, but the total body of accumulated knowledge in pursuit of Truth is much greater today than was the case in Plato's time. Modern communications does owe much of its concern and accomplishment to the disturbing influences of Plato.

Passing from the problem of meaningful, cognitive principles of persuasion to the question of ethical goals, one may note that contemporary communication teaching and teacher preparation is becoming increasingly sensitive to values — social, cultural, religious, moral, and aesthetic. Thinking on this topic tends to follow two ancient lines: relativism, on the one hand, and a conviction of general human worth on the other. The relativist view commonly becomes expressed as an emphasis on values of western civilization. But this perspective contains a cynical denial of general human worth and concern. At present, this philosophy of rhetoric is fighting a rear-guard action. The Baird-Knower school of dynamic communications, which provides much leadership in mid-western America, affirms that no theory of general communications has a sound basis without a commitment to principles of general concern in the pluralistic, human universe. For both immediate and long-range purposes, therefore, general communications study emphasizes that communicators must develop character, personal responsibility, and a sensitivity to the values and worth of others affected by any communication process. For instance, this view implies that the use of communication systems and processes for the manipulative exploitation of people, especially when communications is devoted to the support of war for reinforcing better business than usual, is ethically wrong. The use of communication systems and processes for the encouragement of general welfare, for the furtherance of human culture and art, and for the pursuit of human truth through scientific research, dialectical discussion, symposiums, and real debates on alternatives of policy is ethically good. Only the latter view develops responsible leadership.

The question of correlating principles and objectives through sound instruction has been a main burden of modern communications teaching. In addition to the older, classical models of rhetorical and poetic concepts, much new information has been accumulated on the adaptability of communication contexts for problem-solving discussions for oral interpretation, and for creative dramatics in the public schools. Growth needs and ethical goals are bein met by an increasingly larger body of artistic methods, models, skills, and media.

Plato's concern for mathematical certainty in all the social effects communicated within the ideal just state was one-sided. Human dynamic cannot be so limited. To argue that a lack of effect is due to the tragic formlessness in the materia. world is insufficient; such a view considers material and experience in a passive sense which ignores the material's own dynamic potential. Plato's system lends itself admirably to programmed learning, but the genuine dynamics of communication may be more gestaltist in nature.

Again, modern communication principles proceed according to functional, pragmatic

concepts. On this basis, Plato's assertions about knowledge and virtue seem quite arbitrary. To abstract from perceptual object to general form, and then again to cognitive classes still more inclusive and superior to the forms of the understanding seems very enlightening. What is shown? The cognitive postulates, truth axioms, and Form of the Good thus abstracted seem more solid than the shifting shadows of appearing objects. Are they? Is it not arbitrary to designate an abstracted form as "knowledge" in order to discriminate against an asymmetrical perceptual experience as unworthy art or illusive imagery? Pragmastist approaches may not have established the goal of Truth, but the functional concern for experienceable reality through perceived series — effects has treated knowledge and art in an apparently far more creative manner.

Then it is indeed gratifying to learn that rhetoric receives her axioms and virtuous character from self-evident statements based on an undefined principle of unity. Is this really so? or does Plato construct his philosophy on the realities of persuasion by padding? Certainly the elaborate, ornate oration which concludes the *Phaedrus* smacks of elocutionism. Current communications practice also supports the position that the mode of communication should be suited to the requirements of the situation. The speech is for the assembly, not the assembly for the speech. To adhere rigidly to the classical lines required by Plato for full-orbed oratory is to stress pomposity at the expense of efficiency and adaptability. Ultimately, as Quintilian contended, one could counter the reduction of rhetoric to philosophy by the reduction of dialectics to a science of general communication, which then could be subject to evaluation through the criteria of possible public service. The latter proposal might at least avoid the multiplication of nebulous classes for the sake of empty domains. It might also prove to be more flexible and genuinely productive.

A sense exists in which the theorizing of Plato is basically unhistorical. The process of abstraction raised to the level of metaphysics represents a flight from spatio-temporal processes to an unhistorical rest in self-evident axioms and forms. Then to assert the existence of these classes from a pre-existent eternity is, of course, the ultimate test! Modern communications work must build her edifice on more realistic foundations. General communications and the work of preparing today's speech teachers must be capable of comprehending research and instruction based on empirical analyses, trends, and the evaluation of probable consequences.

One may compare Plato's imaginative search for basic principles, for elegant form and style, and for ethical ideals derived from the Form of the Good to taking an airplane ride in order to visit a friend in the next block. Unless one simply enjoys riding in airplanes, the effort seems hardly proportional to the end achieved. More recent, functional concepts of aesthetic experience find the baroque character of the Platonic effort curious or amusing. Even modern mathematics has come to favor the operational attitude of Archimedes to Plato's majestic system of intellectual stultification.[6] Surely the study of oral persuasion has yet much to learn in matters of efficiency and economy of work. The future of communications may not be a fair copy of her grand flight in the past, but her work promises to be more functionally elegant and productive for public work.

But the work of communications cannot escape the marks of her philosophical combat with Plato. However he may develop new arts and new symbol systems, a person becomes increasingly conscious of the lack of neutrality in communications systems. Much current writing to the contrary, the truly philosophical communicator becomes increasingly aware that in the processes of symbol selection, in organization, and in arrangement, he is constantly confronted by commitments to theoretical truths, to aesthetically pleasing designs, and to ethical direction and purpose. A real science of communications still requires that her servants honor their commitment to Truth, Beauty, and the Good.

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[1]Alan Monroe, *Principles and Types of Speech* (New York, 1949)

[2]George H. Wikramanayake, *Das Verhaeltnis von Philosophie und Rhetorik bei Platon und Aristoteles;* text in English (Goettingen, Germany, 1965), 43-46. cf. also Sir Arthur Pickard-Cambridge, *The Festivals of Dionysius at Athens*

[3]Ibid., 46-47. Harry S. Broudy, "Historic Exemplars of Teaching Method," N.L. Gage, *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (Chicago, 1963), 1-43.

[1]Ibid., 52, 150, 170-171.

[2]A. Craig Baird and Franklin H. Knower, *General Speech*, 3rd edition (New York, 1963). Otis M. Walter, "On Views of Rhetoric, Whether Conservative or Progressive," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, XLIX (December, 1963), 375. Wayne E. Brockriede, "Toward a Contemporary Aristotelian Theory of Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, LII (February, 1966), 38-40.

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Dr. Griffin will serve as a graduate professor on the new Master's program in Speech Communication at Southern Connecticut State College. At the present time, he is a member of the Executive Board of the Speech Association of Connecticut and was Editor of its Newsletter from 1968-69. He is currently the Director of the Speech Association of Connecticut's Research Committee. Professor Griffin is a member of the Speech Association of Connecticut, the Speech Association of the Eastern States, the New England Speech Association, and the Speech Association of America.

In addition to his faculty duties, Dr. Griffin is a Creative Dramatics Consultant for the Scranton Child and Safety Center Grant Program in New Haven, Connecticut; was the former Robert F. Kennedy Campaign Chairman, currently the Kennedy Action Corps Chairman in Cheshire, Connecticut; and the founding member, candidate, and platform writer for the Coalition Party in Cheshire, 1969.

Professor Griffin has published frequently in the *Connecticut Review* and has worked on two books which will be published in 1970, "Das Ewige Vestalische, A Burnacini Opera Folio," and "High Baroque Theatre and Culture in Vienna."